And This is France!

By H. de WISSEN

IS THE France of the American novel, the American drama, and the American film the REAL France? Is the France that we know—the France of Gaby Deslys, of French novels, of the Folies Bergere, and of the Montmarte the France that held back the tide of German aggression for four long years?

Most decidedly not!

But the real France, the France we SHOULD know, is the France portrayed in this interesting story by De Wissen.

The France of the Parisian, the France of the peasantry, the France of the bourgeoisie—all are incorporated in this facinating story.

WHY, France? Certainly we know France. Gabys Deslys—ooh, la la! And then those French novels; they ruled them out of the library in my home town. Now the average American conception of France is that it suggests something like pay night in a mining town with the rough edges worn off. A million or so doughboys went to France and the million or so have brought back stories of France. They observed, in the village where they were billeted, that the richest man had the largest pile of refuse in his stable court. They observed that the French did not give them any more for nothing than they would have received at home. Their impressions of Paris seen through a haze of prejudice or *vin rouge* take in the Place de l'Opera, the Folies Bergere, perhaps a hotel in that notorious neighborhood of the Gare de l'Est where they were swindled outrageously; perhaps they went to the Louvre, most assuredly they went for a walk through the Champs Élysées—. So this is Paris!

American fiction, American drama, American movies, those three faultless interpreters of foreign life, have succeeded in placing before our people, a conception of the French that is about as accurate as our conception of the people of most other foreign lands—which is zero.

Judging from the only material at hand, that which our best selling novelists and playwrights have presented to us, France is composed of extraordinary people who spend the day chasing errand girls of millinery shops, of men, who, when they become footsore, sip vivid colored liquors under the awnings of sidewalk cafés, ogling in the meantime the passers-by. A nation of beloved "cheaters," but then, of course, they are French, and one can excuse much. An impossible people, effervescent, excitable, inclined to fly off the handle, always doing chivalrous things, throwing money around like cigaret coupons, a nationality devoted to pleasure—who somehow managed to buck up during the war. Let us see:

The Frenchman's extravagance?

With one exception, the Frenchman is the most frugal man in Europe. He doesn't care any more for the coin of his realm than the Pole does for his—which is saying all that can be said.

He is not impulsive; on the contrary, he is an extremely calculating person who rarely does anything until he has deliberated long about it.

Excitable?

On the surface only.

The German is infinitely more excitable than the average Frenchman.

Romantic?

He is not as romantic as the Irishman or the American.

Immoral?

He is not any more immoral than the dwellers in the average American town.

Chivalrous?

In his subway, he is like we in ours—a seat hog.

But Paris? Surely that is Sodom, the Barbary coast, and the Winter Garden rolled into one. Look at the Paris theaters; look at its streets; look at those restaurants with their *chambres separées*. As for the theater, not a bit more risque than New York's or Chicago's or any other American city's; but adroit rather than banal when it is risque. As for its wickedness, have you ever walked along Broadway or, in a carefully observant mood, along the main street of your own home town? To one who has lived in France, it is impossible to find more immorality there than in the United States. Also, home life is valued a little higher in France than it is among us—believe *that* or not.

THE French people may be broadly divided into five groups—the Royalists, the Bourgeois (upper middle class), the Petit Bourgeois (lower middle class), La Classe Ouvriere (the factory workers), the Peasantry (the farmers). Each class has its distinct influence upon the government and upon French thought.

The Royalists are signified by their name. They long for a court; they adore titles and ceremony; they whisper in their homes of a Restoration, but take it out in talk. They are made up of most of the so-called leading families of French society. They are strong but their organization is held in check by the government. They almost all make the gesture of being devout churchmen—a gesture common to Royalists who cling to the fatuous belief that the "people should be set a good example." They have little or no following in the active government; rather their strength lies in the army where they are represented by such prominent men as Marshal Foch and General de Castelnau.

It is this royalistic element in the army which has inspired in France that deep grained fear of "The Man on Horseback"—that some day he may come clattering under the Arc de Triomphe and place a king on the throne. The Royalists are still entrenched in the landed interests of France. They have many followers among the peasantry, strange to relate, doubtless due, however, to their powerful connections with the church—which ever preaches contentment for peasant consumption. Their official organ is "L'Action Francais" which, however, circulates only among themselves. They are the predominant intellectual element of France but they have no monopoly upon Gallic brains.

France's real strength lies in its Bourgeois class and in its Peasantry.

The Bourgeois is representative of the business interests of the country. He is the most progressive element in France but he is very, very conservative in his investments. To be sure, now and then a French promoter lures enough victims for some wild scheme. But the proportion of the gullibility of the middle class in France to that in America (witness Wall Street) is about in the ratio of one to a hundred. Also the Bourgeois, with the Royalist, makes up intellectual France.

The Bourgeois never rushes. American business methods, "quick action," are utterly foreign to his nature. With him, home life is the dominant thing. He loves comfort but he is not frivolously luxuriant. He makes a god of his stomach and worships the god well. He knows how to drink wine without swigging it. He never lets business interfere with his home life. As a rule he takes off two hours for lunch and goes home to eat it. He is the kind of a man who on a very sunny day carries an umbrella.

In the home of the Bourgeois the father is boss. Mother and children both "yes" him. He loves children, which seems to run counter to birth-rate statistics of France; but the psychology of it is that he really loves children well enough not to want them unless he can decently provide for them. His children are brought up rigidly; politeness and respect for elders is drummed into them. Compared with them, American youngsters have a picnic, for French girls and boys go to school from eight in the morning until five in the afternoon. A big point of difference between the Bourgeois and his prototype in America is in his vastly superior education. He is aware of something else in the world besides the business which happens to be swelling his bank account and he has a keen appreciation of all the things that go to make up culture. He believes totally in education being a people's salvation; and practices his preachment.

Very similar to him is his not so successful brother, the Petit Bourgeois, this group being composed of shop-keepers, dabblers in little businesses and trades people. They are bitterly opposed to the Royalists. A thrifty, hard working class composed of people who make home life a dominant feature, they help make the sinew of the nation.

Like them is the Peasantry, thrifty and saving. The French farmers are contented with their lot. They are satisfied with little and make the little go a long way. They were the strength of the French Army, its most determined fighters, for they loved their land, their little farms which their ancestors never owned. Oddly enough, French farmers did not unseat royalty in France during the Revolution. It was the people in the cities who did that, the Paris mobs and the land was turned over to the farmers. Just as in the recent Russian Revolution the Bolsheviki made the peasants of Russia indifferent to what was going on so long as they got their land, so did the Mirabeaux and the Robespierres swing the peasants to their side in the days of the Commune—by giving them little parcels of land. But the French peasants swung back and today, due to the church, many of them are active sympathizers with the Royalists. Particularly is this true of the peasants in Brittany, in the chateau country, centered by Tours, and in the south of France.

The French industrial workers, La Classe Ouvriere, are the least educated people in France and at the same time they harbor in their ranks some of the keenest thinkers. They are socialistic, anti-cleric, and savagely anti-Royalists. They are always grumbling that they are oppressed and have no money, while they spend their money freely.

To understand the French, one must understand La Gloire.

Now, about La Gloire.

Not wholly disinterested interpretations of it have been offered from time to time which seek to show that "La Gloire" the synonym for a militaristic spirit supposed to animate the French people; that way down deep in the average Frenchman there is a desire for conquest; indeed, he has been accused of being as militaristic as the German. Now, no people are by nature militaristic people. The average man in any country does not care to be shot full of holes and left out for the crows so that somebody else may grab more land. People are beguiled from time to time, all depending upon the cleverness of their leaders, into the militaristic mood. And the people wake up; and then there is trouble; and then there are royal goats and army goats offered up for sacrifice. Behold citizen Wilhelm Hohenzollern and citizen Eric Ludendorff. From the time of Napoleon it was the purpose of those who had selfish reason to make other nations suspicious of the French, to paint them as a militarist at heart, to point to the doctrine of "La Gloire" and hold up their hands in horror.

But, "La Gloire" translates into glory. It implies "for the glory of France," but that does not mean glory on the battlefield. After Napoleon, the French people were pretty well fed up on battlefields. It means, "so that France may be glorious, let us do well everything we undertake." A French sculptor, writer, manufacturer, farmer, banker—if he is a true Frenchman—at some time or other in his leisure moments thinks of "La Gloire." It is really a beacon beckoning him on, an expression of an ideal—"I will succeed for France"—bred of an intense love for the land of France. For the French are a nation of farmers, in their hearts.

Have you ever been in the kitchen of a French home? Have you ever seen that large vessel kept on the stove, in the homes of high and low, which is called *marmite au feu*. It is a symbol of French thrift. Into this big kitchen pot is dumped every morsel of food that is not eaten on the table. A strange mixture is cooked therein, even chicken's feet go into it, but because of the incomparable skill of the French housewife, the mess served out of the *marmite au feu* is a feast for the gods.

Have you ever seen French people eat? It is perfectly good manners in many homes in France after you have gone as far with an entree as a fork will carry you, to call in the light artillery and attack with a spoon. There is still something left on your plate? Mon Dieu! Bring up the heavy guns. So you now storm your plate savagely with a piece of bread, rubbing up all the gravy until the plate is once more clean and white. All of which is being thrifty with food and with kitchen help, saving as it apparently does the labor of dish washing. But, to a Frenchman an Englishman once said: "In England, my dear fellow, one never uses one's bread for, er, mopping up gravy."

"In England, Monsieur, you have no sauces worth mopping up."

YES, the average French household gets a franc's worth out of every franc's worth of food it buys. Also, because it has defied the palate, it has acquired the art of taking very cheap and very tough cuts of meat and by clever cooking and the use of sauces, turning this cheap meat into veritable delicacies.

In France there is no such thing as "have one on me." The expression "Dutch treat" is not confined to Germany. If two women go out to tea, each pays her own way. If you drop into a café with a man for a cup of coffee he pays for his and you pay for yours. Also, the pocketbook loosening qualities of John Barleycorn have no influence upon your true Frenchman for he can sit and drink the awful vermouths and anisettes and triple secs with his friends without ever uttering "have one on me." Were he to "treat," his friends would think him mad. The French are a "pay as you enter" people.

Because of the government's action some years ago against the Church in France there is a belief that the French are not religious. Not a village in France, but you can come upon those wayside shrines, built by some grateful farmer in a year when he had a particularly good crop. The religious element of the French, the people of France who are most devout, are the peasants.

The French like churches. They like very much a ceremonious form of worship; it excites their imagination. But there are no such things as Wednesday prayer meetings in France. Rather they begin their thought of religion about the time the bells are tolling on Sunday and they cease it about the time they descend the church steps. It has been a very pleasant hour and religion is a good thing for everybody. "It is Sunday and the country is very beautiful, so let us take our families into the fields and gather flowers and be happy." It is not a moral crime to laugh in France on Sunday, to go into an ice cream soda store, or a café, which is the nearest thing to it. For France never had a shipload of Puritans make a landing on her shores.

There is no girl in the world who is kept so much in a glass case as "Madamoiselle." In the average small city of France it is unthinkable for a young girl to be seen in a restaurant alone with a young—or old—man. Were a girl to be seen, she would be taboo in the town. Gossip among the French is a terrible thing. To go out to dinner or to the theater in the evening, a girl, if she cares what people will say, must inflict a chaperon upon her escort.

There is no romance in the French marriage. It is a very cut and dried affair, arranged by the parents, and contracts are signed stipulating how much boodle is going to be put up.

It must be true.

We have seen this situation used in our wonderful American theater.

Rot!

There is about as much romance in a French marriage as there is in any other. Parents who attempt to arrange the weddings of their offspring rarely meet with success.

But the French are a very canny people. They can show even the Scotch a few points. The French have a theory that love and a happy marriage cannot always exist on love alone. They admit the possibility of their being such things as rent and butcher's and grocer's bills. Of course, this is not sentimental but then the French are an unregenerate, immoral people—aren't they so interpreted in our musical comedies? The average French parent has an idea that youth in love is apt to be idiotic. The average French parent, therefore, seeks to do everything in his power to make his sons' or his daughters' marriages happy ones—shamelessly believing as he does that economics has something to do with happiness. We, of course, being very superior people, don't admit that. Love will find a way.

When papa learns that daughter Suzette is receiving the attentions of a certain young Henri, he expects a visit from Henri's father. The old folks get together; one expresses his intention of giving his daughter a dowry, a nest-egg for the new home. That is

(Concluded on page 9)